

MODERN PERSIAN AND AFGHAN THINKING

If some of our interested friends in Christian countries could have opportunity to read the newspapers and magazines that appear regularly in the Persian language, they would see articles from time to time that would suggest, either from their subject-matter or from the manner of treatment, that a much greater freedom of thought has already come to Persia. It is the object of this article to set forth a few illustrations of this tendency in the Persian press, and also to show that Christian missionaries who are working in Persia have sensed the changing situation, and are meeting the new freedom of thought with bolder and more direct evangelistic undertakings, and that such efforts have already been fruitful of gratifying results.

HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHY OF PALESTINE

A detailed description of the geography and history of Palestine appeared in *The Iran*, one of the Teheran newspapers, under date of December 21, 1917, when what was happening in Palestine was attracting considerable attention in Persia. In narrating the history of Jerusalem, the writer shows how David made it his capital city, how the Jewish kingdom was divided, how in later years Cyrus showed friendship to the Jews, and how after the time of Alexander the city "was passed from hand to hand," until it came under the rule of the Herods. Judas Maccabeus and Herod the Great are mentioned. It is stated that following the destruction that occurred under Titus the city was of no considerable political importance until the reign of Hadrian. One significant sentence is that a very lofty dome was erected at "the place where the Jews had crucified Jesus Christ." (See Koran, Sura Al-Nisa, vs. 155-6.) It goes on to say that after the city was taken by Moslems, Christians were still granted the right of pilgrimage. After referring briefly to the Crusaders, it

says that Saladin took the city from the Christians and that it has since been in the control of Islam. This article describes also the cities of Gaza and Hebron, which is now called Khalil. The city of Nablous is said to be the same as the Roman Neapolis. Haifa is spoken of as the point of departure by rail to the Hedjaz. Acca is also mentioned, as the place where the founder of the Behai sect is buried.

The significance of this citation is that the Persian writer, whoever he was, who wrote this account of Palestine, did so with the desire to be historically accurate, not from the point of view of various Moslem traditions, but with access to modern sources.

WHENCE ASCETICISM IN RELIGION?

In the *Tazeh Bihar*, a Meshed newspaper, an article appeared on January 20, 1920, continued on the 22d and the 27th, which was entitled "Asceticism Among the Hindoos." The first section treated of asceticism in general, and declared the purpose of asceticism to be the control of passions in order to please God. The author indicated three points of view as to the beginning of asceticism: first, that it came from the teaching and example of Jesus Christ; second, that it originated in the teaching of Buddha; and third, that it could be traced to heathen practices of much more ancient times. The writer shows how the history of asceticism in the Christian church exhibited its weakness, that its principles are not sustained by a more careful study of the New Testament, and that many of its characteristic features can be accounted for only by heathen influences from Greece and Rome. Similarly, while the teaching of Buddha certainly had ascetic tendencies, Buddha's search for truth was not productive of the knowledge desired, and at any rate, is not to be thought of as the beginning of ascetic practices in India.

Among the Greek ascetics, Orpheus, Empedocles and Pythagoras are mentioned, and the influence of the Neo-

philites upon both Jews and Christians is described, showing how special times were appointed for fasting, how some went naked, and how others isolated themselves in order to achieve their religious desires. Antonius of Egypt is also mentioned as having made a vow to keep silence for the rest of his life.

Insomuch as the civilization of India and of China was not unknown to the ancient Greeks, the author thinks it probable that some of these ideas reached the West from these ancient eastern countries.

He then proceeds to point out varieties of asceticism in India, referring to the fact that fakirs may be seen riding on beds of spikes, that sadhus may be found in caves among the mountains or far out on barren plains. Some of them have vowed neither to move nor to speak. Others lie prostrate in the dust or hang themselves by the feet from branches of trees, with a fire burning on the ground beneath their heads. Others braid chains into their flesh, others let their finger nails grow long and turn them over so that they grow back into the flesh, others put hot spikes through the calves of their legs, and others learn to walk on red hot iron—all of this with the idea of propitiating some divine power by enduring pain or deprivation. The parents of a son who dies from such practices rejoice in the thought that he has earned salvation. And among certain sects in India, an iron idol, like Moloch, with fire within, has received infant children as burnt offerings from their parents. A loud noise is made at the time so that the cries of the children may not be heard.

In comment on the essay on asceticism which I have summarized above, I wish to remark that personally I am proud to live in a country where articles of this sort are given space and prominence in the daily newspapers. People who want to think must be given food for thought, and it is my impression that the editors of papers and magazines in Persia realize this, and are striving, many of them, to meet the demand.

THE LIFE OF MARTIN LUTHER.

In the *Kaveh*, a monthly magazine published by young Persians living in Berlin, and circulated in Persia, there has been a series of articles under the heading of "Famous Men of the East and West." The number published October 3, 1921, contains the life of Martin Luther. It starts out by saying that it is generally recognized by European thinkers that if Martin Luther had not broken the power and bigotry of the Catholic priesthood, Europe would not by any means have reached the modern degree of civilization and enlightenment. He showed that there must be freedom of thought in religion, and that religion in itself is not contrary to reason. His work was in the beginning of the reign of reason, when science and philosophy were taking new life, and with the new freedom of thought, the Christian religion made rapid progress. Accordingly the science, civilization, and religion of Christendom, owe an everlasting debt of gratitude to Martin Luther.

The article goes on to point out that in Mohammedan countries to-day there are reforms needed in many lines, among which the following are mentioned: (1) Considering others than Moslems unclean. (2) The imprisonment of women by the purdah system. (3) The legalizing of polygamy. (4) The ease of divorce. (5) Deeming those of religions other than "ahl-i-kitab" infidels and worthy of death. (6) The restriction of religious teaching to the Arabic language.

The story of the life of Martin Luther is then narrated, and throughout there is emphasis on the necessity for freedom of thought in order that civilization may advance and intellectual progress be made possible.

DESIRE FOR LEARNING IN AFGHANISTAN.

A brief reference at least must be made in this article to the quickened intellectual aspirations in Afghanistan, Persia's neighbor to the northeast. In a little weekly

magazine, published in the Persian language in Kabul, called the *Iman-ul-Afghan*, dated the 8th of November, 1921, I have at hand a full report of an interesting function before His Highness Amanullah Khan, the Amir of Afghanistan. A group of young men were being sent at government expense to study in Europe and America, and this occasion was an official send-off. A few quotations from some of the speeches that were made are suggestive of changes that have been taking place in the public sentiment of Afghanistan.

First, the Minister for Foreign Affairs addressed the Amir and the assembled company. "In the first place," he said, "as one of the fathers of the boys who are going away, I wish to emphasize that we are to remember that these young men are leaving their native country as a patriotic and as a religious duty. Although the Amir began his reign with a religious war (jihad), that has improved the position of Afghanistan, nevertheless he is now undertaking a more important religious war—against folly and ignorance, in that these our own dearest sons are being sent abroad to study science and philosophy. And this is quite in accord with our religion, for we should take pains to know the science and philosophy even of the lost peoples. It is not incumbent upon us on this occasion to weep at the departure of these, our boys, but to sing and be happy, for there is every probability that their going will result in the advancement of our country. We who are fathers are not able, in fact, to express our gratitude, but can only say to the Amir, our sovereign, that we thank him, and shout sincerely, 'Long live the Amir!'"

The Amir himself then arose and replied as follows: "I am hoping for the good name of these young men, both those chosen from the people and those of the royal family. And in regard to this service on my part, if fortune should favor, and when you return I should be living, that will be good, and if I should be dead, you

can come to my tomb and enumerate your accomplishments, one by one, and after that I will rest in my grave in peace. So now I commit you unto God—go in peace, and may you return!”

There were other addresses, notably a rather long one by one of the Afghan schoolmasters, but a most significant feature followed, namely, the presentation of money contributions, on the part of fathers who were not sending sons, to help pay the cost of sending this group of young men abroad to study.

It would indeed be strange if this progress in thought among Persian speaking peoples were not accompanied by encouraging results in the work of Christian missionaries. I am glad that it is possible for me, quite incidentally and without any special investigation, to give good news from several widely separated places. First let me quote a clipping that reached me in a letter recently concerning the work of the Christians in Isfahan, where the Church of England missionaries are working.

“The great feature of Easter Day at Isfahan this year, preaching is done by two converted Moslems. The one 1921, was the Holy Communion service, conducted in Persian, with one hundred and fifty communicants, at which six lay readers were licensed, including one Hebrew Christian, two Armenians, and three converts from Islam. One Armenian received a license from Bishop Stileman some years ago, but it is believed that each Sunday for Moslem converts and adherents. The this is the first occasion on which Persian Christians have been set apart publicly in their own church for the work of evangelists. The offertory on Easter Day and the Lenten self-denial gifts of the Isfahan Christians were for the London poor; thus the Church in Persia is helped to realize that it is the part of the whole Church, and has responsibility towards poorer brethren in foreign lands.”

And I have at hand a letter from a friend who is working in Tabriz, in the West Persia Mission, which is under

the direction of the American Presbyterian Board. He writes as follows: "We are having splendid meetings each Sunday for Moslem converts and adherents. The preaching is done by two converted Moslems. The one was formerly a mullah, and the other is also a well educated man. They study the Bible and a sort of crude homiletics with me every week, and I fear they can already preach better than I can in many regards. God is granting us the increase too. Two weeks ago two Moslem women confessed Christ, and last week one man, and so we hope our church is getting started on a firm foundation. We have not yet fully worked out the problem of this body of Moslem converts in relation to the Assyrian and Armenian members of our church, but we feel more and more that there must be some distinction between the organizations, though we hope to keep all as parts of one body."

Meshed Station, also under the American Presbyterian Board, is in what is called the East Persia Mission, and lies in the far northeast corner of Persia, close to the border of Afghanistan.

On Christmas of the year before the splendid Easter service mentioned in Isfahan, i. e., Christmas 1920, fifteen Moslem converts were baptized together in Meshed, and during January, 1921, organized themselves, with the help of the two Presbyterian ministers in Meshed, into a church, having five ruling elders and one teaching elder. The ministers ordaining these elders represented the Presbytery of Pittsburgh and the Presbytery of Philadelphia, but the church in Meshed has no technical denominational affiliation. As yet that has not been explained to them. When questions come up they search Paul's letters and the Acts of the Apostles for parallel or suggestive cases. They have written their own confession of faith, consistent with the Apostles Creed as far as it is theological, but including also a statement of standards for the personal conduct of Christians, and definite suggestions for giving, and rules for the disbursement of

funds. They have adopted this Statement of Beliefs, as they call it, as a working basis for the present. At the request of the Session one of the American ministers preaches once a month, and the balance of the preaching is done by their teaching elder, whom they call their pastor.

A reading room is conducted by the Mission, and it is practically a Christian Club or Library—their social center. The pastor is manager of this reading room, but one of the missionary ministers is at work in his study, immediately adjoining the reading room, every day except Sunday, and there it is that he meets and talks with the prospective enquirers whom the Christians bring to him, tries to answer questions the Christians come to ask, meets enquirers for regular instruction, carries on his personal studies, correspondence, etc. During the year following the organization of the Meshed Church there were forty-one adults, all Moslem converts, added on profession in the entire Meshed field, twenty-six in Meshed, and the balance in Nishapur, Kafir-kaleh, and Seistan; and there are other small groups, not yet baptized, in Kuchan, Turbat, and Birjand. These outlying cities have been reached by the testimony both of Moslem converts and of missionaries from Meshed.

The subjects mentioned in this article seem to the writer to indicate, in the first place, that thousands of people in Persia have been making progress in thought, especially in the freedom of thought, and to show in the second place that many of the Persian people are psychologically ready to accept Jesus Christ as their divine Saviour, and to band themselves together in groups of Moslem converts to present the love of Jesus Christ directly and tactfully to others. It is a time for gratitude in prayer, and for Christ-guided discrimination in the employment of time.

DWIGHT M. DONALDSON.

Meshed, Persia.